

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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The King of the Jews: Mockery, Mystery and Murder

by Dan Trygg

“I gave My back to those who strike Me, and My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard; I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting.”

Isaiah 50:6

“His appearance was marred more than any man, and His form more than the sons of men. ¹⁵ Thus He will sprinkle many nations...”

Isaiah 52:14-15

“Pilate took Jesus and scourged Him.” (19:1) -- A Roman scourging utilized the infamous “cat of nine tails”, a whip consisting of leather strips with bits of bone or lead attached to them. The weight of the lead would increase the punishing force of each blow, and the sharp bits of bone would penetrate the flesh, tearing it as the whip was withdrawn. By the time a scourging was completed, a man’s back and legs would be a shredded, pulverized, bloody mass. Victims of a Roman scourging often died under the whip, or as a result of the beating.

The Mockery of Jesus – “The soldiers...” (vs. 2) -- Matthew and Mark tell us that the entire Roman cohort, a tenth-part of a legion, or a company equaling 600 men, **were “called together”** into the Praetorium (Matt. 27:27-31; Mk. 15:16-20), the palace of the governor, away from the eyes and ears of the Jews (Jn. 18:28). From Luke’s account, we know that Herod and his men had already ridiculed and mistreated Jesus, sending Him back to Pilate in a beautiful robe (Lk. 23:10,11). Apparently, this inspired the cruel mockery of Jesus at the hands of the Roman soldiers. The fact that the entire cohort was “called together” signifies that **there was a particular intent to make an example of Jesus**, ...an example of Roman domination and superiority over these rebellious, subject people. It was a propaganda exercise to rally the men together to dramatically express their subjugation and humiliation of their enemies.

“...twisted together a crown of thorns...” -- A clear reference to the charge against Him of being the “King of the Jews”. The soldiers supplied a mock crown to dress Him for their charade. **“...a purple robe...”** -- Whether this was the same robe Herod sent, or a different one, the significance of the color was that it was the color worn by royalty. Purple dye was very expensive, made from a gland salvaged from the shells of certain mollusks. The most desirable species was fairly rare, and the harvesting and production process was very labor-intensive. **“Hail, King of the Jews!”** (vs. 3) -- Dressed in the costume appropriate for their sport, the soldiers began to act out their mock respect, rapidly turning to cruel brutality. From Matthew, we discover that they also gave Him a reed as a scepter. They began by kneeling before Him in mock deference. Instead of the customary kiss, however, they spat in His face, and beat His head with the reed scepter, driving the thorns into His scalp (Matt. 27:29-31). John adds that they slapped Him in the face. How many participants actually struck Him is not clear, but Isaiah’s prophecies about the suffering Servant of Yahweh could have been literally fulfilled in Jesus: “I gave My back to those who strike Me, and My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard; I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting”; and, “His appearance was marred more than any man, and His form more than the sons of men” (Isa. 50:6; 52:14). **Between the whipping, and the brutal beatings at the hands of the temple guards, and now the Roman soldiers, surely the Lord would have been virtually unrecognizable**, all but de-faced by the abuse He endured.

“Pilate came out again...” (vs. 4) -- Remember, the Jews were waiting outside (18:28,29). **“I find no guilt in Him.”** -- This is the second time the governor has declared Jesus innocent (cf. 18:38).

“Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe.” (vs. 5) -- The humiliation and mockery done to Jesus would have been apparent to all. **“Behold the Man!”** -- Pilate directs the crowd’s attention to the broken and beaten man, the so-called “King of the Jews”, dressed in mock royal finery. He may have hoped that this extreme humiliation would satisfy their purposes, and they would assent to let Jesus go. **“When the chief priests and the officials saw Him, they cried out saying, ‘Crucify, crucify!’”** (vs. 6) -- Instead, their thirst for blood and vengeance caused them to cry out for more punishment. Probably the extremity of Jesus’ wounds, instead of pricking their compassion, had the effect of almost dehumanizing Him, degrading Him in their eyes, so that they only wanted Him destroyed (cf. Deut. 25:1-3). **“Take Him yourselves and crucify Him, for I find no guilt in Him.”** -- The words of an exasperated Pilate. He knew they could not legally execute Jesus. This third time he declares Jesus’ innocence, yet he could not convince the crowd to accept his decision. Legally, his decision was binding, but he wanted the people to be in agreement with him. **“He ought to die because He made Himself out to be the Son of God.”** (vs. 7) -- From an OT Hebrew perspective, the title, “Son of God”, was a title for the King, the Messiah (Psa. 2). To Pilate, with his polytheistic background of Greek and Roman mythology, this title would have meant something entirely different, possibly bringing to mind a demi-god, such as Hercules. The Greek construction would lend itself to promoting this

confusion, since there is no “the”, i.e., “He made himself (a) son of God”. His subsequent reaction and his questions would seem to support this supposition.

Pilate’s Growing Desperation – “*When therefore Pilate ...heard this..., he was the more afraid.*” (vs. 8) -- The word “more” indicates that he was *already afraid*, undoubtedly a reference to the unsettling message from his wife regarding her dream about Jesus (Matt 27:19; cf. study notes from 18:39,40). Although John does not mention it, he assumes that the reader would have known about it. There is no other explanation from the context that would give cause for Pilate to be “more” afraid. “*...and he entered into the Praetorium again, and said to Jesus...*” (vs. 9) -- The combination of (1.) Jesus’ strange way of talking about His kingdom as being “not of this world” (18:36); (2.) the warning from Pilate’s wife (approximately simultaneous to 18:39); and now, (3.) the knowledge that Jesus claimed to be a son of God, compels Pilate to interview Jesus yet again, in private. This is no longer just a passing thought in Pilate’s mind. He just had Jesus paraded out before the crowd (vs. 5). Now, he has Him brought again away from the presence of the crowd to where he could speak to Him in private. He needs to make sure he is not getting himself into some much deeper, mysterious trouble brought on by the gods. “*Where are You from?*” -- Again, the question itself betrays the thought process Pilate must have been traveling. There is more to this Man than meets the eye. “*But Jesus gave him no answer.*” -- Cf. Isa. 53:7. “*Do you not know that I have authority to release You, and I have authority to crucify You?*” (vs. 10) – Pilate was accustomed to being answered when directing questions to an accused person. He reminds Jesus of the seriousness of His situation, claiming to have life or death authority over Him. “*You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above...*” (vs. 11) – Jesus’ words actually play into Pilate’s fears. The reality is that Pilate is only playing a part in a cosmic drama orchestrated by powers beyond this world. His authority over Jesus is only what has been permitted by heaven. “*...for this reason, he who delivered Me up to you has the greater sin.*” -- These words do not remove the responsibility of Pilate’s choice, but they indicate that the cosmic drama orchestrated from above is not about him. The Jewish leaders will be judged far more harshly than Pilate, for they were clearly conspiring unjustly to do evil. “*As a result of this Pilate made efforts to release Him...*” (vs. 12) -- Clearly, Pilate believed what Jesus was saying enough to attempt to secure His release. He could see that Jesus was innocent, and he knew that handing Him over to the Jews would be wrong, i.e., a sin. Although it may be judged as a lesser sin by Jesus, nevertheless it would be a fault levied *against him*. He was hoping to “cheat fate”, if there was some larger supernatural plot, avoid his culpability in this sordid affair, and escape being manipulated as a pawn by divine beings. To us, this might sound far-fetched, but Greek and Roman mythology was full of such tales.

Pilate Outmaneuvered – “*...but the Jews cried out, saying, ‘If you release this Man, you are no friend of Caesar; everyone who makes himself out to be a king opposes Caesar.’*” -- This was the trump card with which the Jews could pressure the governor for his compliance. The Greek is stated more directly, “If ever you might release this one...”. **The Jews were making a very direct threat. They were saying that if Pilate, ...by any method, strategy or loop-hole..., succeeded in releasing Jesus, they were going to report him as a traitor to Caesar. This was no idle threat, and Pilate knew it.** Caesar had become very insecure and suspicious of any possible rivals. Others had been removed from positions of power, some had even been charged as traitors themselves, for not taking a strong enough stand against crackpots and imagined threats to Rome. Pilate knew he could not afford to risk such an inquisition. He was checkmated by the Jews. “*When Pilate therefore heard these words, he brought Jesus out, and sat down at the judgment seat...*” (vs. 13) -- From this point, Pilate goes through the motions, but clearly under protest. It is probably at this juncture that Pilate washed his hands in front of the crowd, saying, “I am innocent of this Man's blood; y’all see!” (Matt. 27:23). He was calling them to witness that *he* was not the one who wanted Jesus’ death. In response, the crowd answered, “His blood be upon us and our children!” “*And he said to the Jews, ‘Behold, your King!’ ...The chief priests answered, ‘We have no king but Caesar.’*” (vss. 14,15) -- To remove any doubt concerning his loyalty, and to force the Jewish leaders to make their own statement of loyalty to Rome, Pilate presented Jesus as the King of the Jews. As distasteful as this was to the Jewish leaders, had they not replied with a declaration of loyalty to Caesar, Pilate could have charged *them* with treason, turning the tables on his blackmailers. Ironically, their confession was true enough. Certainly, God was *not* their King, though they would have claimed so. Now they were forced to confess that the only king they serve is one who was an earthly power who dominated them by force and political expediency (i.e., self-interest). “*So he then delivered Him to them to be crucified.*” (vs. 16) -- **By self-compromise, they succeeded in their self-seeking purpose: the murder of the innocent King of the Jews.**

The posturing and hostile interactions between Pilate and the Jewish authorities sound very similar to our political scene today. **Many interactions in families, the workplace, and even between “friends” can be tainted by similar dynamics: attempts to “one-up”, manipulate and control someone else. Often, ...in the competitiveness of such interactions..., truth, integrity and morality are sacrificed for expedience.**